Pierre-Antoine Bellangé's Seating Furniture For The White House: Its Evolution Within the Interior

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Chapter 1: Furniture of Dignity and Grandeur Befitting such a State

George Washington envisioned the President's House as being a residence for the Head of State, operating as a physical embodiment of the American ideal: rational, structured, and authoritative (Figure 1). This vision included far more than just an architectural shell; equal emphasis was put on the interior space as it acted as a national and international venue for the governing of American policy and diplomacy. The President's House was, and is today, a patriotic monument, meticulously tended to, in order to poignantly promote what the United States is: a country based on the principles of freedom and democracy (Figure 2).

The fifth President of the United States, James Monroe, had to reinvent the Washingtonian principles in 1817 while acting as the overseer for the reconstruction and refurnishing of the President's House following its burning by the British in 1814 (Figures 3 & 4).[i] Washington's work with James Hoban on the original house was carefully calculated so that the end product was the greatest home in the nation and as splendid as the "first buildings of Europe."[ii] This work was one of the earliest and most crucial moments of Monroe's Presidency. Although his predecessor, James Madison, was in charge of initiating reconstruction of the President's House, James Monroe oversaw the final architectural plans and outfitting the interior, with the ultimate objective being a series of rooms, reflecting and promoting classical American ideals. Additionally, Monroe was conscious of contemporary fashions and made sure what filled the President's House could be a source of national pride and in good taste. He chose to outfit the cavernous rooms of the house with a variety of furnishings, both of his own personal collection and

custom creations from the United States and abroad. Although a Madison administration appointee, Commissioner Samuel Lane, was officially designated to oversee the project, Monroe made sure he had a hand in the decision making process. To secure his inclusion in the choice of furniture, he personally commissioned an import firm, Messrs. Joseph Russell and John LaFarge of New York and Le Havre, to accumulate furniture, textiles, ceramics, and silver from America and abroad to befit such a place.[iii] In early nineteenth-century America, Russell and LaFarge were known as the top import agents of European goods for wealthy Americans.

Although the firm of Messrs. Russell and LaFarge took charge of furnishing all of the President's House, the most well-known, and highly publicized, commission they brought to Washington was a fifty-three piece suite of gilt émpire seating furniture and pier table by the French master ébéniste Pierre Antoine-Bellangé for the large elliptic room where foreign dignitaries entered and were received. Bellangé was fifty-nine at the time, and his successful career would extend for another ten years. Although Monroe accepted public credit for the interiors of the President's House, in fact his only hands-on involvement in the order was the suggestions he provided for the furniture's decorative motifs: richly polished mahogany furniture adorned with eagles (Figure 5).[iv] Russell and LaFarge went to Paris to find such items and worked with what was available in keeping with the Monroe's preferences, as well as attempting to keep within the limit of allocated federal funds.

The importance of the furniture chosen was salient. Monroe and the agents knew the objects chosen would make a statement, and it was important they made the right one. In addition to their symbolic function, the seating furniture would act as a resting place for the President, the President's family, visiting kings, queens, princes, princesses, and the like. Thus, it was essential that the choice furnishings should be made by the premiere cabinetmaker of the day, of the finest materials, and stably constructed. The intended atmosphere of the elliptic room, as both a place for socializing and diplomacy, was dependent upon the furnishings. Monroe wanted nothing more than the absolute best, and at the time, France was the lead producer of the finest furniture.

The elliptic room, on the south side of the house, was designed to act as the formal entrance to the President's House, giving the Bellangé suite the important role in welcoming guests (Figures 6 & 7). Visitors drew their first impressions of the President and the nation from these fine objects. The North Portico, later added by President Andrew Jackson, now acts as the formal entryway to the President's House.

The gilded surface of the Bellangé suite transmitted a brilliant glow both by sun and candle light. This brilliance, however, came with a substantial price tag. The United States suffered a massive debt from the War of 1812, and allocating a large portion of tax dollars to fancy furniture did not hold the highest position on the government's priority list. A request for less-expensive, ready-made furniture was made before the Bellangé suite was ever ordered. Upon arrival in France, the agents were told pre-made furniture was practically impossible to come across for a

project as important as the President's House of the United States. Commissioner Lane wrote to Monroe explaining Russell and LaFarge's inability to find readymade furniture in Paris:

> Sir [President Monroe]: Our Mr. Russell having been detained at Bordeaux by business, transmitted to us the orders he received from your Excellency for the purchase of the furniture for the palace of the President at Washington… Our Mr. LaFarge went to Paris in the beginning of June for this purpose, when the result of his inquires soon convinced him that there was no possibility of purchasing anything ready made, and in order to comply with the instructions of your Excellency of 23 April, he was under the necessity of ordering the whole of the furniture to be made, that he might be sure to obtain such articles in united strength with elegance of forms, and combining at the same time simplicity of ornament with the richness suitable to the decoration of a house occupied by the first Magistrate of a free Nation.[v]

Commissioning American cabinetmakers to create the elliptic room's important furnishings was always possible; New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore were thriving cities at this time with well-known cabinetmakers who could provide for their President. Washington, DC, also had widely known cabinetmakers, such as William King (Figure 8) and William Worthington (Figure 9). Both of whom did produce furniture for Monroe, but for less formal spaces. Just a few years prior to the burning of the President's House, Dolley Madison, wife of President James Madison, had furniture designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe for the elliptic room made in the latest French "antique" fashion by the Baltimore cabinetmakers John and Hugh Finlay (Figures 10 & 11).[vi]

The *Intelligencer*, a Washington newspaper, reported on November 29, 1817, that the President had, in particular, "[taken] care… to have as much furniture made [in] Washington as possible."[vii] The President's use of tax dollars to import goods saw little public opposition. The practice of importing fine objects from abroad to

outfit a home was still widely accepted in America. Countries other than France were also exporting furniture to the United States. Spain, Italy, Portugal, Germany and Austria all had major furniture export industries. However, in 1817 the United States and France shared an alliance with one another reflecting their support of either's revolutionary efforts. This political kinship, combined with France's production of high-style furnishings, made it the best resource[viii]. France's superiority in furniture design, production, and exportation was known by other countries as well; art historian and James Monroe scholar Hans Huth discovered that governments, other than the United States, regularly sent to Paris for goods, as it was "the center for industrial arts."[ix] Bellangé himself provided furniture to other international magistrates, including a suite of furniture for the King of England at Windsor Castle.[x]

The English were also well-known for their furniture trade, at the time producing the *Regency* style (Figure 12). However, the Bellangé suite, being imported furniture for the President's House, embodied the interrelationship of politics and aesthetics. Although the Treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812 had been signed December 24, 1814, Americans were still smarting from the devastation wrought by the war. There was no option for the President's House to be furnished with objects from the country which destroyed the original house. America's relationship with France, Russell and LaFarge's familiarity with the importation of French objects, and Monroe's preference for the French design synced with contemporary thoughts on patriotism, politics, and aesthetics.

In order to obtain "suitable richness" in furnishings, Parisian cabinetmaker Pierre-Antoine Bellangé, was one of the most qualified candidates for the commission (Figure 13). By 1817, he served as the lead ébéniste to the court of Napoleon I and Joséphine Bonaparte (Figure 14). Despite Napoleon I's exile from France, 1815 to 1818, Bellangé was one of the few ébénistes to keep his profession, and life, continuing his work under Louis XVIII, Charles X, and Louis-Philippe. His furniture commissions survive in the collections of Windsor Castle, the Hôtel de Beauharnais, Versailles, Chantilly, the German State collections, and the Williamsburg Art and Historical Center of Brooklyn (Figure 15).[xi] The selections in Brooklyn are said to have been a commission by Napoleon I's brother, Joseph Bonaparte.[xii] Joseph reigned as King of Naples, Sicily, Spain, and the Indies in his brother's empire (Figure 16) prior to leaving Europe for Point Breeze, New Jersey following the fall of his brother's empire.[xiii]

For the elliptic room, Monroe asked for a suite of mahogany furniture with an eagle motif incorporated.[xiv] Throughout the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, mahogany was the most fashionable wood to have furniture made from for Americans. American cabinetmakers, like New York's Duncan Phyfe and Charles-Honoré Lannuier, produced furniture with mahogany imported from South America. Unfortunately for Monroe, Bellangé no longer produced furniture with mahogany as it was now out of fashion in high-style European furnishings. The 1805 *Étiquette du Palais Impérial*, a guidebook on design and etiquette for the French elite, suggested the use of gold leaf-covered furniture in stylish interiors (Figure 17).[xv] Bernard Chevalier, Curator of Josephine Bonaparte's residences at Malmaison and Bois-

Préau, believes this alteration was a part of Napoleon's promotion of France's native woods: beechwood, burr cedar, elm, or ash.[xvi] A letter addressed to President Monroe, from the agents, declared, "mahogany is not generally admitted in the furniture of a Saloon, even at private gentleman's houses."[xvii] Knowing Monroe wanted the best and most fashionable, the agents ordered the following: "[a] set of drawing-room furniture of gilded wood carved with branched olive leaves and covered with a heavy satin material of a delicate crimson color, with a pattern of laurel leaves in two tones of gold."[xviii] The image of an eagle was woven into the upholstery in order to fulfill Monroe's request for eagle ornament (Figure 18). A friend of Monroe's, James Brown of Baltimore, was in Le Havre, France, while the agents attended to the President's orders. Per Monroe's request to hear on the furniture's status, Brown wrote to him about the use of the eagle on his furniture, sharing information from the agents:

> He [Russell or LaFarge] informed me that he had directed the eagle to be placed on the chairs and some other parts of the furniture, but that the bird being in bad repute at court the workmen were ordered to desist and told that special permission must be obtained to enable them to execute the work… Mr. Russell's partner sets out for Paris next week. Presume, upon giving proper assurance that this bird of evil omen will speedily take flight to America, he may be permitted to perch upon the furniture of the Government house.[xix]

The agents probably did not ask for further permission to have the eagles incorporated into the carving after the denial of their initial request for it, especially in following Monroe's orders in an April 23, 1817, letter, which directed the two men not to mention where the furniture was going and the purpose it served.[xx]

French politics played heavily into the furniture trade at the time. The defeat of Napoleon I and the restoration of the Capetian Dynasty by Louis XVIII in 1815